

## Lost Generation or Generation Now?

### *Getting Syrian Refugee and Host-Community Adolescents Back on Track in the Kurdish Region of Iraq*



## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Syria and exodus of Syrians to neighboring countries is now in its fourth year. The length of this conflict tragically reminds us of the lives lost, as well as Syrian refugee and host-community children and adolescents who lack education opportunities, face serious social tensions and suffer from unfulfilled potential and productivity. A recent study by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) showed that Syrian refugee children and adolescents are experiencing a variety of hardships including isolation and insecurity, psychological distress, extended disruptions of education and exploitative employment.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has called the international and host country communities to action in order to avoid losing an entire generation of educated, engaged and productive Syrian refugee and host-community children and adolescents. To avoid this loss, existing humanitarian efforts must be coupled with an increased focus on developing future-oriented strategies that prepare adolescents in particular with the education and skills they need to help rebuild their lives and societies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Future of Syria: Refugee Children in Crisis. UNHCR, November 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Lost Generation – A Strategy for Children Affected by the Syria Crisis. UNICEF, October 2013.

Mercy Corps believes that adolescents aged 12-19 represent a critical cohort who warrant particular attention and investment. Adolescents are largely missing out on psychosocial support, education and skills building programs as they are increasingly either forced to stay indoors for their safety — the case for many adolescent girls — or to work inside or outside the home to support their family — the case for both adolescent girls and boys. Adolescents will also be first among the generation of children affected by the Syrian conflict to be called upon to help mend torn social fabric and rebuild broken economies.

In an effort to fill gaps in action-oriented research on Syrian refugee adolescents and their host-community peers, Mercy Corps conducted eight focused discussions with adolescents in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) in June 2014. Based on those discussions, this report details findings and presents recommendations that should guide investments in future-oriented strategies to facilitate and improve adolescent well-being and critical development skills for Syrian refugee and Iraqi Kurdish adolescents residing in host communities in the KRI.

This report supports and expands on previous findings that indicate that while early measures by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to help integrate the Kurdish refugee population from Syria – referred to as Syrian refugees in this report – were important initial steps, subsequent border crossing closures, restrictions on obtaining residency identification and a lack of absorptive capacity of the local economy for jobs and the educational system for learning has inhibited these progressive measures from having their intended impact.<sup>3</sup> With the recent influx of Arab Iraqis displaced into the KRI from Mosul and elsewhere in northern Iraq, the KRI is likely to experience increased strain on already stretched social, health and educational services, further deteriorating the situation for all refugees from Syria, particularly those living in host communities and marginalized from camp-based humanitarian and programmatic supports.

## RECLAIMING ADOLESCENCE

More than one million Syrian children who are under the age of 18 and are living outside Syria continue to miss educational and life milestones. Among these children, 68 percent are not attending school.<sup>4</sup> Inside Syria, more than half of school-age children (2.8 million) are out of school<sup>5</sup> and three years of conflict have eroded 35 years of development.<sup>6</sup> Missing these milestones will continue to deny Syria and the region of the productive, wage-earning youth and adults it needs to stabilize tensions and drive future social and economic development for decades to come.

In the KRI, 217,795 Syria refugees have registered and 60% (130,677) of those are estimated to live outside of camps.<sup>7,8</sup> Over 15% of these refugees are young males who are not in school and are without work. 41% of refugees in the KRI are under the age of 18, and of those living outside of camps, only 5% to 10% are enrolled in school.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of current programming does not effectively reach adolescents because they are either working or kept at home. If targeted properly, adolescents at the brink of adulthood are poised to serve new roles as productive members of their communities. But if they are not set up for success, this group of young people could drive further destabilization in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> *Failing Syrian Refugees in Iraq's Kurdish Region: international actors can do more.* Norwegian Refugee Council. June, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Lost Generation – A Strategy for Children Affected by the Syria Crisis.* UNICEF, October 2013.

<sup>5</sup> *Syria Crisis: Education Interrupted.* UNICEF, World Vision, UNHCR, Save the Children, December 2013.

<sup>6</sup> *The Syrian Catastrophe: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report First Quarterly Report.* UNRWA, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.refworld.org/docid/520dfa414.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>

<sup>9</sup> 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan, Iraq retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/docs/syria-rrp6-iraq-response-plan.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

From 9-12 June, 2014, Mercy Corps convened eight focused discussions with more than 80 Kurdish Syrian refugee and host-community adolescents between the ages of 12-19, who were segmented by sex, nationality and place of residence. Focused discussions were conducted in two locations in the KRI — Sulaymaniyah and Bazian. Sulaymaniyah is an urban area, while Bazian is a rural area approximately 45 minutes drive from Sulaymaniyah. While refugees live disbursed throughout Sulaymaniyah city, Bazian is more isolated and hosts the highest concentration of Syrian refugees in the greater Sulaymaniyah area. Approximately half of the participants were female and half were male (Bazian: 56% Female and 44% Male and Sulaymaniyah: 49% Female and 51% Male).

Kurdish Region of Iraq							
Bazian (rural)				Sulaymaniyah (urban)			
Female		Male		Female		Male	
Iraqi	Syrian	Iraqi	Syrian	Iraqi	Syrian	Iraqi	Syrian
12	13	9	11	10	10	10	11

Participants were identified by outreach workers affiliated with community-based organizations (CBOs) and were included on the basis of not having been directly engaged in previous child protection, psychosocial support or youth development programming in hopes of informing strategies to better engage hard to reach adolescents. Education status was not documented for participants; however, discussions revealed that approximately half were in school and the other half were out of school, with girls and Kurdish Iraqis more likely to be in school compared to boys and Syrian refugees.

Mercy Corps’ research methodology was adapted from multiple methods, specifically Photovoice,<sup>10</sup> IDEO’s Human-Centered Design Field Guide Aspirations Exercise<sup>11</sup> and Technology of Participation (TOPs) Focused Conversation using ORID questioning.<sup>12</sup> Instead of adhering to traditional quantitative and qualitative methods, a different approach was taken to increase engagement and improve the quality of participation. Adolescents were provided with digital cameras and art supplies and asked a series of guiding questions<sup>13</sup> related to their current situation and future goals to guide their photography and artwork. Adolescents then selected photographs and artwork to share with the group to generate discussion.



Female adolescent, Bazian

<sup>10</sup> Wang, C. and M. Burris. Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education and Behavior*. 24 (3): 369-387, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> IDEO, Human-Centered Design (HCD) Field Guide, Second Edition.

<sup>12</sup> Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional (ORID). More information at:

[http://ispimi.org/images/meeting/082212/focused\\_conversation\\_univ\\_minnesota.pdf](http://ispimi.org/images/meeting/082212/focused_conversation_univ_minnesota.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Guiding Questions included: What do you like about your current situation? What don’t you like about your current situation? What would you like to be doing in three to six months?

These discussions were facilitated and documented by young adults (ages 25-35) of the same sex as the adolescents. Facilitators asked adolescents a series of probing questions to describe, reflect on and interpret their photographs and drawings.<sup>14</sup> In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants including representatives of the Syrian Association in Sulaymaniyah and Bazian and a Director of a school in Sulaymaniyah established for IDPs and teaching Syrian refugees.

## KEY FINDINGS

All of the adolescents interviewed face serious challenges to their future development that cause them stress and concern. However, challenges faced by Syrian refugees were discussed with a strong sense of urgency and focused on filling immediate needs, coping with new living conditions, and solving problems that will get them through the days and weeks ahead. The challenges faced by the Iraqi Kurdish adolescents were less urgent and longer-term issues that were more deeply ingrained in cultural and political norms and realities, but which are nevertheless stressful to manage and affect their lives in very real and immediate ways.

The following table gives an overview of the priority issues that emerged from the focused discussions with each group. Further explanation of these issues follows below.

Adolescent Group	Priority Issues								
	Quality of Education	Access to Education	Meeting Basic Needs	Work Issues	Gender Issues	Marginalization & Discrimination	Social Opportunities	Language	Social Justice / Environment
<b>Refugees from Syria</b>									
Females - Bazian		□	□			■	■	□	
Females - Sulaymaniyah		□				■	■	■	
Males - Bazian		■	■	■		■	■		
Males - Sulaymaniyah		■	■	■		□		□	
<b>Host Community</b>									
Females - Bazian	□				■		□		□
Females - Sulaymaniyah	■				■				
Males - Bazian	■						□		■
Males - Sulaymaniyah	■								■

■ Primary Priority    □ Secondary Priority

Primary priorities are issues that groups indicated are of great importance to them, or talked about at length. Secondary priorities are also of concern, but not to the same degree. Other issues not marked or listed here may also be important, but did not arise during the discussions.

<sup>14</sup> Probing questions included: Please describe your photograph/drawing. Why did you take/make this photograph/drawing? How does this photograph/drawing make you feel? In three to six months time, what would you like to see changed about this photograph/drawing? How would you go about making that change and who/what might help you make that change?

## Adolescent Development Challenges

### Social Marginalization & Discrimination

Despite sharing Kurdish ethnicity and having access to residency cards and work, social marginalization and discrimination are serious issues faced by adolescent Syrian refugees. Adolescent refugees described feeling disliked by host community peers, experiencing various forms of discrimination, and experiencing social isolation. Notably, the degree of social tension that the refugees are experiencing in the KRI is somewhat less than the isolation that Mercy Corps' assessments have found in other locations, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In these countries, many adolescent refugees are unable to work or go to school, and experience greater physical isolation due to security concerns, some resulting from verbal and physical abuse by host community members.

Of the groups in this assessment, Syrian refugee girls reported the greatest amount of social isolation and marginalization, and felt that they are treated like strangers even though they are also Kurdish. They were acutely aware of social factors that make them different, such as their clothes and the food they eat, and many of them believe that the Iraqi Kurds do not like them. A girl in Sulaymaniyah said,

***“I don’t talk in public at school because they [Iraqi Kurds] make fun of me.”***

A Syrian refugee girl in Bazian described how she felt hurt when her family’s neighbors provided them with goods and aid, but did not socialize or visit with them. Many of the girls compare everything unfavorably to what is back in Syria, and most expressed an interest in going back to Syria. Some girls shared feelings of forsaking Syria and their previous lives by make new attachments in Iraq saying, “I don’t want to exchange my friends in Syria with new friends here.” This type of thinking could be a result of frustration with their current lives, but it could also prevent them from adjusting to and investing in their new lives in host communities. Some of the girls, particularly in Sulaymaniyah, seem to be overcoming these hurdles, and are making friends, becoming more involved and comfortable in the community, and even expressing a desire to stay.

The Syrian refugee boys in Bazian reported experiencing more isolation and discrimination than those in Sulaymaniyah, and talked about Iraqi Kurdish boys bullying and provoking fights. The Syrian refugee boys in Sulaymaniyah expressed that some people discriminate, but that others are accepting and friendly, and that they are actively involved in their new community.

Interestingly, while Syrian refugee adolescents, and particularly girls, are acutely aware of discrimination and tension, Iraqi Kurdish adolescents and adults interviewed did not perceive this as an issue. This difference could be attributed to perspective and awareness: Syrian refugee adolescents, who as adolescents are already at a stage of life where they are hyper-alert to issues of identity, are all the more sensitive because of their identity and vulnerabilities as refugees. Discussions with refugees revealed a heightened awareness of how they fit in, so that even small incidents of discrimination take on powerful significance. The Iraqi Kurdish adolescents and adults, on the other hand, are not as sensitized to this mistreatment and therefore may not notice discrimination happening around them. One exception is Iraqi Kurdish girls in Sulaymaniyah, who are aware that the Syrian girls think they do not like them. They want to help the Syrian girls, but are not sure how.



Male Adolescent, Sulaymaniyah

### Social Opportunities

All four groups from Bazian as well as Syrian refugee girls in Sulaymaniyah would like more opportunities for social interaction with their peers. This finding is reflective of the lack of activities and social opportunities available in rural Bazian compared to urban Sulaymaniyah. It also reflects refugee families being more protective of their daughters than their sons, and discomfort with letting girls go out on their own in a new environment.

Both groups of Syrian refugee girls mentioned wanting to play sports, and the group in Sulaymaniyah would like to start a girls' football team. Both groups of boys in Bazian wanted more opportunities to get together with their peers to talk.

### Education

Education emerged as an important issue for all of the groups, but their concerns and challenges differed in terms of quality and access to education, as well as gender issues in school. For the Syrian refugees, the fundamental issue is lack of access to education, while for Iraqi Kurdish adolescents, concerns focused on the quality of education related to curriculum and teachers. Iraqi Kurdish girls shared deep concerns about gender issues in school.

#### *Syrian Refugees*

Refugee boys face the greatest challenges. They have mostly dropped out of school in order to work, and recognize that they are falling behind and that this will likely impact their future potential whether in their host communities or back in Syria. As refugees, they need to work to contribute to their family's basic needs, and some have become the main breadwinners in the family. One boy in Sulaymaniyah said,

***"I wish I could have money to go to the school and learn without being worried about paying rent for the house, but I have to work in order to help my family with everyday life expenses."***

Many of the Syrian refugee girls were in school, but some were not attending due to perceived barriers around enrollment because certificates from their schools in Syria were lost or left behind. Other barriers that girls reported keep them from attending school are financial, including family pressure to work. An additional challenge is the capacity of schools in the KRI to accept more students, as most are crowded and cannot accommodate the increase in students. On paper, Syrian refugees have the right to attend school and the schools are legally obligated to accommodate them. However, they are not always able or willing to do so. Once in school, refugee students face additional challenges. Language is a barrier (see the Language box below), and there are differences between the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish curricula that refugees from Syria must adjust to, setting some students back by two or more years. Nevertheless, some of the girls who were out of school described missing school and wanting to go to school when they return to Syria. Other girls who are in school appreciated the opportunity to continue learning despite the challenges. A Syrian refugee girl living in Bazian described her feelings as, "Even when I go back to Syria, I will always be thankful for what I learned at school here."

#### *Iraqi Kurds*

The Iraqi Kurdish boys in both Bazian and Sulaymaniyah were dissatisfied with the quality of education in KRI. Many expressed frustration with how they are treated by teachers and principals, and feel that teachers are dismissive of their questions, do not encourage creativity and initiative, and do not respect the students. One boy from Bazian described asking questions at school saying,

"Whenever we ask the teacher a hard question he neglects us or just shouts at us not to waste his time." The boys in Sulaymaniyah expressed frustration with the education system and considered it poor compared to the European system described to them by Iraqis who have secured asylum in Europe.

Iraqi Kurdish girls did not express the same frustrations over the school system, but clearly value education and have hopes about how it can benefit them in the future. Many have plans for university and are concerned about getting into a good university. A girl from Sulaymaniyah expressed that,

***"Society will look at you in a different way, a more positive one if you finish your education. And education will also make me more open-minded and knowledgeable."***

These girls, and particularly the group from Bazian, have specific concerns about how gender issues in school and interactions between boys and girls affect girls and their education. They discussed how parents and teachers often disapprove of friendships between boys and girls, and will remove girls from school if girls are seen to be interacting too much with boys. An Iraqi Kurdish girl from Bazian described how a teacher asked a girl, 'Aren't you ashamed that you talk to boys that much?' The teacher's question reportedly caused the girl to cry class and she never returned to school after that incident.

### **Work**

Many Syrian refugee boys and some Syrian refugee girls are working. Boys were described as working at factories, carrying goods, in construction, and in restaurants/bakeries and at markets. Girls were described as working at greenhouses, in clothing factories, and at salons. The role of boys in the family has changed for many of the Syrian refugees we spoke with. Before they left Syria, boys went to school. But now that they are refugees, many need to work to bring money in for their families, and some have become the main breadwinners. One key informant reported that while he would like his sons to return to school if and when they return to Syria, the fact that they have lost everything requires that they work to build back a basic standard of living. Some girls are also working, but this is less common due to families concerns for girls' safety.

Syria refugees living in host communities in the KRI are fortunate relative to Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon in that they are legally allowed to work, which gives families greater opportunities to fulfill their basic needs. However, this opportunity comes at a cost. Youth who drop out of school are foregoing their own long-term interests through losing out on educational opportunities. In addition, work is often hard to find, stressful, can be dangerous, and often does not pay enough to cover a family's basic needs. Youth often experience humiliation and frustration because of discrimination in pay (they are often paid less than local and Turkish workers) and poor treatment by their employers and other workers. The male refugees who had left school for work expressed a strong desire to return to school, but short of that, they would like to have opportunities for vocational training. One boy in Sulaymaniyah said,



Male Adolescent, Bazian

***"Most NGO's have [vocational] training but they aren't accepting ages under 18 so we are not included in most of those trainings."***

## Gender

Gender, women's rights, and equality are the issues of most importance to Iraqi Kurdish girls. As noted above in the section on education, the way girls interact or are perceived to interact with boys can have significant consequences on girls' lives, and therefore produce stress and concern, particularly in rural and socially conservative areas. Girls are very aware that they are treated differently than boys, and feel that they receive unwanted attention in public for doing things that boys are permitted to do. This attention makes them uncomfortable, and they sometimes feel that they are to blame and wonder what it is that they are doing wrong. They gave the example of drawing attention when they were out taking photographs during the assessment exercise. Similarly, an Iraqi Kurdish girl from Bazian explained,

***"I don't feel comfortable when I'm mixed with boys at school, because then I can't be myself and do what I want."***

Girls expressed they felt it was unfair that boys and men have rights that women and girls do not. A girl from Sulaymaniyah described this by saying, "In Holland they have a special path for bicycles. If you want to do that in Kurdistan, they will tell you, 'It is taboo, taboo, taboo when a woman will bike.'"

Gender issues did not come up in the discussions with Syrian girls, likely because other issues, such as marginalization and isolation as refugees and simply coping with and navigating a new culture under difficult circumstances are overshadowing many of the issues that the girls might ordinarily be thinking about.

### Language Obstacles

Language is an issue for most Syrian refugees. The refugees speak Kurmanji, a dialect of Kurdish that is different from Sorani, the dialect spoken in Bazian and Sulaymaniyah. While both groups can generally read and write standard Arabic, the spoken Arabic is also somewhat different, and while Syrians tend to speak Arabic outside of the home, most Iraqi Kurds speak Sorani outside of the home.

Both groups of Syrian refugee girls were interested in learning Sorani in order to be able to communicate more easily with Iraqi Kurdish girls, and to be able to perform better at school. Syrian boys, on the other hand, did not mention language as a major obstacle.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues described above suggest a number of important interventions that can positively impact adolescent Syrian refugees living in the KRI, as well as their host community counterparts, and address some of their deepest needs. These include opportunities to build programming around some of the advantages that Iraqi Kurdistan has to offer: the opportunity to work, the fact that many Syrian refugee girls have access to school, and the shared ethnic heritage. For example, programming can work with Syrian boys to improve employment and non-formal educational opportunities, and with Syrian girls to strengthen opportunities for educational, social and vocational engagement, and with all youth on community service projects to develop skills and strengthen social connections, self confidence and respect for themselves and others in their community.

The table below lists interventions according to participant group, as determined from focused discussions, followed by a brief explanation of highlighted programming recommendations.



Adolescent Group	Program Types						
	Market Assessments / Job Training / Employment Skills	Educational Support	Psychosocial Support	Safe Spaces for Girls	Community Service Projects	Goal Setting & Planning	Language Lessons – Sorani & English
<b>Refugees from Syria</b>							
Females - Bazian	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Females - Sulaymaniyah	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Males - Bazian	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Males - Sulaymaniyah	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Host Community</b>							
Females - Bazian			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
Females - Sulaymaniyah				<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		
Males - Bazian			<input type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Males - Sulaymaniyah					<input type="checkbox"/>		

Most Relevant     Somewhat Relevant

## Programming Recommendations

**Market Assessments, Job Training & Employment Skills:** The enabling labor laws in the KRI present valuable opportunities for out of school adolescents to pursue safe and equitable work. Conducting market analysis and engaging adolescents in that analysis through youth-led market assessments should be used to ground employability and vocational training in market realities. In particular, out of school boys and girls need to be productively engaged in the KRI and build up greater transferable skills for the future.<sup>15</sup> Existing vocational skills programs designed for older youth, similar to those run currently by Mercy Corps, should be adapted to blend transferable employability skills and appropriate technical skills that are linked to market opportunities. These activities should be provided outside of the school context to accommodate the large number of out of school adolescents. These activities would allow many adolescents to pursue their stated goal of becoming financially independent and opening a small business in the future.

**Educational Support:** Many Syrian refugees are struggling in school due to curriculum differences, language barriers, and missed years of schooling, and are at risk of dropping out. Others have already dropped out or are missing school altogether because of tremendous pressure to work, a perception that they lack necessary paperwork, or not being allowed to go to school for security or financial reasons related to traveling to school or uniform and meal costs. Programs working with adolescents need to proactively target those most at risk of dropping out, or recently dropped out

<sup>15</sup> Transferable skills include time management, constructive communication, teamwork, and financial literacy in addition to technical and other skills.

but likely to re-enroll, with tailored support, as well as those who have already been out of school for longer periods of time. Awareness should be raised to clarify that past school records are not required to enroll in school.

Well-targeted programs can provide youth with critical support that will increase the likelihood of staying and succeeding in school, or creating a pathway to return to school. Such programs can include tutoring, test preparation and other activities to support improved academic achievement. They can include access to and skills around using technology, which are of great interest to adolescents, and particularly adolescents in Bazian who do not have much access as adolescents in urban areas, and which can enhance employability and social integration. Programs can also include components such as alternative transportation that improve access by helping get students, and girls in particular, to and from school safely.

Finally, alternative learning arrangements are needed for adolescents who have missed considerable time in school, remain out of school because of perceived eligibility or other access issues or are struggling with language or curriculum. This includes wider recognition and accreditation of credible academic alternatives to formal education. These alternative, or non-formal, education alternatives should be delivered through a blended approach that teaches both recognized academic content as well as agreed upon life and transferable skills.

**Psychosocial Support:** Many of the adolescents, and particularly Syrian refugees living in Bazian, are interested in broadening their social support networks. Psychosocial programming can provide opportunities for collective expression through sport and creative activities to reduce isolation and marginalization and build bonds among peers. These expressive activities also provide an essential building block for establishing trust, building self-esteem and confidence, and encouraging teamwork. These activities should be group-based, mix Syrian and host-community adolescents when appropriate, and be facilitated by trained and trusted Syrian and host-community mentors of the same sex as the adolescents they work with.

#### Safe Spaces for Girls

Establishing safe spaces where girls feel comfortable congregating and spending time together can allow them to explore difficult topics such as issues related to gender, relationships, and other topics of importance. Opportunities for girls to regularly meet with peers and mentors can have a powerful effect – they help ignite friendships, give girls a sense of belonging and respect, and can provide a place to turn to in times of trouble. They can also be used as platforms for delivering new skills and raising awareness of important social and health services.

These spaces should be located near where girls live and in secure and safe locations with safe transportation access. Parental or other gatekeeper approval should be obtained to instill community trust and maximize community acceptance of programming.

**Community Service Projects:** These programs support adolescents to get involved in their community through small-scale community service projects that hone skills and build ownership, respect, and social cohesion. Adolescents share similar concerns about their communities, like trash removal and improved access to recreational and community facilities, and they also share a willingness to work together in mixed groups to implement small-scale community service projects. Community service projects serve multiple purposes. First, they help adolescents hone their life, project-management and transferable skills through real-life application of those skills. Second, by enhancing community spaces, adolescents are increasing their ownership of these spaces and the likelihood that they'll use them for constructive activities. Third, by getting involved in their

communities, adolescents will increasingly be recognized and respected by adults for their contributions, and seen as assets for future community development. Fourth, community projects bring together Syrian refugees and host-community adolescents to work side-by-side to improve shared community concerns. This shared sense of responsibility and accomplishment builds constructive relationships that are based on a mutual recognition of skills and assets.

### The Environment

Youth in Bazian were particularly interested in the environment. Both refugee and Iraqi Kurdish girls spoke about appreciating clean streets. A girl from Bazian remembered a time when “students in my school went around the town and cleaned up all of the things that were thrown on the ground by people.”

Iraqi Kurdish boys from Bazian were distressed at environmental pollution from private companies, as well as decaying infrastructure. Five of these boys took photos of environmental problems. “Companies are supposed to plant trees and green areas but they break rules.”



Male Adolescent, Sulaymaniyah

**Goal Setting & Planning:** For adolescents to effectively navigate their path to adulthood, they need to establish realistic short-term goals and the plans to achieve them. Setting goals, developing plans and building the motivation to implement them are a critical part of personal, academic and professional development and should be fostered in adolescent-focused programming at multiple levels including educational and vocational attainment and community service projects. While a powerful activity, goal setting and planning must be done in a delicate and careful manner to manage expectations. For adolescent refugees, goal setting and planning can help refugees to develop short term plans so they have more skills if and when they return to Syria, and also to make constructive use of their time in host communities. Their future is unclear and unstable, which is why goal setting is challenging, but also why it can help create a sense of purpose and stability.

**Learning Languages:** For Kurdish refugees from Syria, learning Sorani would enable them to integrate better into the local culture as well as face fewer challenges at school. Girls in particular see the value of learning Sorani and many expressed the desire to do so. Additionally, many of the girls – both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish – have an interest in learning English. Providing classes could be a way to further the education opportunities of refugees while providing another forum for cross-cultural interaction.

## CONCLUSION



Female Adolescent, Bazian

The international community and Kurdish and Iraqi authorities are close to losing an opportunity to achieve the potential development gains initially intended through the progressive policies aimed at integrating Syrian refugees into the KRI. What appears to be an enabling policy environment on paper has yet to translate into an enabling environment for the development of Syrian refugee adolescents. A lack of donor support has resulted in some part due to the political complexities of working with the KRG and Iraqi authorities, and a perception that life for Syrian refugees in the KRI is better than for those in other host countries. That lack of support, combined with an educational system that has reached its limits and an uncertain labor market, mean that young Syrian refugees and many of their Iraqi Kurdish counterparts will continue to face frustratingly few meaningful educational, social and employment opportunities.

With the recent influx into the KRI of Arab Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the corresponding redirection of limited resources at a time when available services will be further stretched, a perfect storm of dual streams of displaced people has the potential to overwhelm the already strained KRG, Iraqi and international capacity and response, and make conditions even worse for adolescents.

However, if action is taken urgently and in a coordinated and well-funded manner among international, KRG and Iraqi stakeholders, the negative impact of this worsening situation can be greatly ameliorated if not largely prevented. Meaningful engagement of adolescent refugees and their host community counterparts at a time of their lives when they are poised to contribute their constructive energy would bring not only much needed capacity and energy to a dire situation, but stabilize an increasingly unstable region. The solutions are not out of reach. Mercy Corps along with other actors are ready to provide the educational, social and economic programs and services that can turn the future for adolescents from one of frustration and despair to one of hope.

Adolescents desperately seek these opportunities, and it is in the interest of everyone to provide them with the chance to grow, learn, and give back. If we are to avoid a lost generation of still hopeful, resourceful and entrepreneurial young people, we must recognize that the current generation of adolescence are *Generation Now*, and now is the time to invest in their, and their region's future.

## ABOUT MERCY CORPS

**Mercy Corps is a leading global humanitarian agency saving and improving lives in the world's toughest places.**

With a network of experienced professionals in more than 40 countries, we partner with local communities to put bold ideas into action to help people recover, overcome hardship and build better lives. Now, and for the future.



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